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## *Clowning, Location, and Mediterranean Drama*

### *Abstract*

This essay explores the ways in which early modern clowns disturb both spatial and generic decorum within early modern drama, and examines the ideological implications of these disturbances. With a particular focus on plays set in the Mediterranean, it demonstrates how clown-figures, through a variety of techniques, refocus attention on the performance space even at moments when plays seem most concerned with the real geographical locations they present. The essay ends by considering the impact of clowning on plays' capacities to construct what John Gillies has influentially called a 'geography of difference'.

Key words: clown, Mediterranean, dramatic geography, intertheatricality, genre, performance style

In his notorious assault on the practices of the Elizabethan theatres, Sir Philip Sidney made two complaints relevant to the following essay. The first was that Elizabethan plays established a confused sense of location: 'you shall have Asia of the one side, and Afric of the other', Sidney writes, 'and so many other under-kingdoms, that the player, when he cometh in, must ever begin with telling where he is, or else the tale will not be conceived'. The second was that these plays were 'neither right tragedies, nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns ... with neither decency nor discretion'.<sup>1</sup> Like others, I would regard early modern theatre's spatial and generic fluidity as a great strength, rather than an embarrassing weakness. But the more specific point I wish to make in this essay is that Sidney's observations are connected: clowns, I shall demonstrate, disturb not only generic decorum, but also spatial decorum. Sidney's assertion that the Elizabethan player announces the imagined location in order to fix the geography of the scene suggests a strained, but regulated, relationship between dramatic space and character. But clowns seem to play by different rules, often entering early modern plays as though wandering in from another kind of world – one wherein voice and body are used, deliberately indecorously, to disrupt such relations. In doing so, I shall suggest, they frequently challenge the generic positioning of,

and thus the value-systems inscribed within, the dramatic locations they have infiltrated. This is in part because of the things they say; but it has also to do with their style of performance, and the relationship they establish with their plays' audiences.

The openings of 'reconstructed' theatres over the past two decades have focused both practitioners' and scholars' attentions on how the material conditions of the early modern theatres shaped the drama performed within them. Recent practitioners have remarked on how the open-air theatres, with their ambient lighting and their almost-bare, thrust stages, ask actors to move away from the 'naturalistic' performance tradition in which they have usually been trained. Scholars, meanwhile, have been inspired to re-think the ways in which original performance conditions, and perhaps in particular the relationship between players and playgoers they fostered, impacted on the meanings of early modern drama.<sup>2</sup> Less has been written, though, on how actor-audience dynamics affected plays' geographies. What I want to offer here, through a discussion of clowning in particular, are some thoughts on how early modern plays created such a capacious, and such a productive, dramatic geography. The first part of the essay examines the ways in which clowns, in part through a performance style that established an unusually intimate relationship with playgoers, extended plays' generic and spatial boundaries; the second part considers how other, related forms of theatrical self-consciousness created a spatial 'doubling', similarly bringing the site of performance into conversation with the site performed.

In order to understand precisely how this 'doubling' operated, we need first to consider the ways in which the spatial codes of the early modern theatres drew upon native medieval traditions of stagecraft. As part of a wider attempt to re-think the boundaries between the 'medieval' and the 'early modern', a number of theatre scholars have recently stressed the extent to which early modern drama was shaped not only by classical sources (Seneca, Plautus) but also medieval forebears.<sup>3</sup> As critics point out, religious cycle plays usually

deemed 'medieval' continued to be performed until the 1580s in certain parts of the country, and had a significant influence on the dramaturgy and the plot structures of plays that held the stage in the decades following the establishment of purpose-built playhouses in London. There are particularly important overlaps in performance styles and player-playgoer interactions. Medieval theatre often works by establishing a meaningful relationship between the *locus* (that is, the fictional world established by the play) and the *platea* (the scaffold, or more broadly the site of performance). The Towneley *Second Shepherds' Play*, for example, begins by staging the adventures of Mak, a sheep-stealer who operates in what appears to be a Yorkshire contemporary with the play's performance, but then transfers its action to Bethlehem to present the scene of Christ's nativity, and it does so in order to draw parallels between the action staged in these two temporal and spatial locations. Rather more straightforwardly, medieval drama disrupts any sense that the action it presents takes place in a fully fictionalised world (or behind a 'fourth wall') by having its characters address playgoers directly. An especially close relationship with the audience is established by the Vice-figures of morality drama, who not only move among the audience in a literal sense, but also tempt that audience to share with them a *perspective* on the play's action. In *Mankind*, for example, the Vices insist on the primacy of the body over and above spiritual detachment, and offer comic material which tempts playgoers to join them in laughing at authority figures who would advocate such detachment.

It is these Vice-figures who anticipate early modern clowns. While clowns are by no means the only early modern players capable of speaking directly to playgoers, they strike up an especially intimate rapport with their audiences, in part through a style of performance that differs subtly from that employed by their fellow actors. It is impossible to be precise about early modern acting styles in commercial theatres: such styles were in flux between 1567 (the opening of the Red Lion) and 1642 (the closing of the theatres), and professional players

would doubtless also have adapted their styles to the theatrical spaces within which they performed, with the more intimate indoor theatres perhaps inspiring a less gestural style of acting than the large open-air amphitheatres; players would also, we can assume, have varied their modes of performance *within* plays according to the particular effect being sought.<sup>4</sup> But when considering early modern clowning, it is still helpful to make a distinction between ‘presentational’ acting, in which the actor shows off his skill *as an actor*, and ‘presents’ his character to an audience of which he is aware, and ‘representational’ acting (or what early modern practitioners called ‘personation’), in which the actor more fully ‘inhabits’ the character they are playing. Clowns typically operate within the ‘presentational’ tradition. Hamlet famously complains that clowns will tend to say more than is ‘set down for them’ (3.2.37), and they do so because they are especially adept at moving between *locus* and *platea*, between the fictional world and the site of performance, and are thus able to react to events taking place in the latter that have no direct bearing on the former.<sup>5</sup> As a result, those watching a clown would be unusually aware that they were looking *at a theatre*. There is contemporary evidence to support such a claim. Recording his experience of watching Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, and more specifically the clown-figure Autolycus, the early modern theatregoer Simon Forman wrote: ‘Remember also the Rog [i.e. rogue] that cam in all tottered like coll pixci’. As Bruce Smith points out, the scene Forman is recalling presents an outdoor space (pastoral Bohemia), and yet Forman’s words ‘came in’ suggest that he saw Autolycus walk through a stage door. This is, as Smith remarks, is a perfectly comprehensible way of ‘reading’ the play’s location: ‘the script calls for a stage clown doing one of his routines as much as it does for a fictional character claiming his place in the story’.<sup>6</sup>

Smith calls Autolycus a ‘man of shifts’ in the sense that he is ‘a man of motion’.<sup>7</sup> But he is also, like other clowns, a man of shifts in his ability to move between the two

coterminous spaces that Robert Weimann would call the ‘world-in-the-play’ and the ‘playing-in-the-world’;<sup>8</sup> and in this respect, Autolycus harks back to the kinds of clowns who appeared within the early years of the commercial theatres in Elizabethan England, and whose impact on later clowns is rarely analysed by theatre historians. One of these neglected figures, who features in the dramatic romance *Clyomon and Clamydes* (a Queen’s Men play probably first performed in the early 1580s), is actually called ‘Subtle Shift’. Like the Vices of morality dramas, Shift frequently addresses playgoers directly; more than this, in fact, he seems to watch the play with us.<sup>9</sup> Also like the Vices, Shift complicates, from the play’s margins, the ideological ‘message’ being conveyed at its centre. At different times serving both Sir Clyomon and Sir Clamydes (the drama’s two chivalric heroes), he speaks from a less elevated perspective than the play’s romance characters, and offers a counterpoint to the militaristic chivalric ethic they articulate. More specifically, Shift holds up a parodic mirror to romance-matter: where travel confers nobility for figures like Clyomon and Clamydes, for the more corporeally-minded Shift it detracts from sexual appetite. ‘But I am so weary, sometimes with ryding, sometimes with running, /And other times going a foote’, he complains to the audience, ‘That when I come to my lodging at night, to bring me a woman it is no boote’ (1247-9).<sup>10</sup> Such moments expand the locational scope of *Clyomon and Clamydes* in that Shift, by directly addressing playgoers, pulls the *platea*-space into focus; and in a related manner, they expand the play’s generic boundaries – Shift’s body-centred approach moves romance towards the picaresque. Bridget Escolme has argued that the early modern clown does not have ‘to “come out of character” to talk to us [because] he appears not to know which is the world of fiction, which the world of the play’ (by the latter Escolme refers to what Weimann would call the ‘playing-in-the-world’).<sup>11</sup> I would want to put the matter slightly differently. Characters like Shift, I would suggest, know what they are doing:

their movements into the *platea* deliberately challenge the generic – and therefore the ideological – centre of the plays in which they operate.<sup>12</sup>

By the 1590s, clowns such as Shift were beginning to go out fashion. But they had not entirely disappeared. Near the opening of Thomas Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda* (1588-91), a play set across Rhodes and Constantinople, the clown-servant Piston is asked by his master to find a lost chain; Piston, who, like other clowns of his ilk, dislikes work of any kind, decides further to outsource the task to the town-crier. In the dispute that follows, the action is pulled away from the Mediterranean of the play's setting and towards the London of its performance.

*Pist.* Come, sirra, let me see how finely youle cry this chaine.

*Cry.* Why what was it worth?

*Pist.* It was woorth more, then thou and all thy kin are worth,

*Cry.* It may be so; but what must he haue that findes it?

*Pist.* Why a hundred Crownes.

*Cry.* Why then ile haue ten for the crying it.

*Pist.* Ten Crownes? And had but six pence,  
For crying a little wench of thirty years old & vpwards,  
That had lost her selfe betwixt a tauerne & a baw die house.

*Cry.* I that was a wench, and this is Golde,  
Shee was poore, but this is rich.

*Pist.* Why then by this reckoning, a Hackneyman  
Should haue ten shillings for horsing a Gentlewoman,  
Where he hath but ten pence of a begger.

*Cry.* VVhy and reason good,

Let them paie that best may,  
As the Lawyers vse their rich Clyents,  
VVhen they let the poore goe vnder *Forma pauperis*.

(1.4.72-88)<sup>13</sup>

Like *Clyomon and Clamydes*, *Soliman and Perseda* is a dramatic romance; and Piston is a character who, like Shift, punctures the lofty romance sentiments of the drama in which he operates. In the passage above we see him complicate the status of the chain, previously a ‘romance’ love-token, by bringing it within a commercial frame. Piston, like Shift before him (albeit through a different strategy), effects a simultaneous generic and geographical shift: the play’s romanced Mediterranean moves towards London-based city comedy. Robert Weimann has brilliantly shown how the clownish Porter in *Macbeth* brings Shakespeare’s play into the *platea*-space by making what are, in an unusually rich sense, ‘topical’ jokes;<sup>14</sup> by referring to the recent ‘equivocation’ trial of Henry Garnett, he refocuses playgoers’ attention on their actual location in space and time, so that Scotland’s political intrigues temporarily give way to highly localised humour. Similar things seem to be taking place in this scene from *Soliman and Perseda*: the passage brings into focus the London in which Rhodes is staged.

The relationship between clowning and location is perhaps at its most dizzying in a scene from Day, Rowley, and Wilkins’ pseudo-documentary *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* (1607), a play probably commissioned by Thomas Sherley as a means of promoting the controversial political undertakings of his two younger brothers, Anthony and Robert. The scene in question stages a meeting in Venice between Anthony Sherley and the famous clown Will Kemp. The playwrights of *Travels* do not entirely invent this episode: Kemp had travelled extensively after leaving the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1598, most



famously Morris dancing from London to Norwich; and he had, indeed, met Sir Antony during his peregrinations. But in reality, Kemp and Sherley met in Rome. The play's relocation of their meeting to Venice is significant, I would suggest, because the play's Venice bears an important relationship to the Venice staged in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-8). *Travels*' playwrights invent, as an antagonist for Anthony, a Jewish figure named Zariph who is deeply conscious of his resemblance to Shakespeare's Shylock. Planning to have Anthony arrested for the non-payment of a debt, Zariph exclaims (in an aside): 'I ... vow to play the Jew; why, 'tis my part' (9.50-1).<sup>15</sup> Zariph is, by his own admission, a *stage-Jew*, a figure structured from prior dramatic fare – especially Shakespeare's. When the 'Kemp' of *Travels* appears in Venice, then, he does so within a staged location partially shaped by a play in which 'he' had played the clown Launcelot Gobbo. But this sense of a layered *locus* is itself complicated by the fact that Gobbo is not, entirely, 'of' Venice. As Jack D'Amico notes, Gobbo is 'a theatrical double': he 'comes from London's streets', and yet also 'derives his Italian name (hunchback) and something of his improvised clowning from the Italian tradition'.<sup>16</sup> Clown-figures such as Gobbo are not, as we have seen, restricted by traditional boundaries of genre, narrative or location: anywhere and everywhere can be their space. It is not even accurate, in fact, to say that such clowns are truly at home 'within a theatre', for Kemp's was a style of performance that could not be contained within a dramatic culture that was drifting gradually (if by no means smoothly) into neo-classicism – hence, we can infer, his departure from the Lord Chamberlain's Men and his extravagant performances beyond London. At this moment in *Travels*, then, we have a moment of vertiginous locational complexity: *Travels*' Venice, which features a fictional Kemp, is shaped by the Venice of another drama in which the 'real' Kemp had acted, and yet when acting in this drama, Kemp's character, Gobbo, was able to move beyond the fictional world in which he operated.

Kemp's action in *Travels* is itself a whirligig of theatrical games. In conversation with Anthony about the theatre scene back in London, he claims that one recent play 'of note' is 'called *England's Joy*' (9.68-9). This was not a real play, but instead a notorious hoax. In 1602 a man named Richard Venner put out a broadsheet advertising a play that did not actually exist; having attracted patrons to the theatre and collected their money, he tried to run away.<sup>17</sup> After alluding to (but not elaborating on) this episode, Kemp then strikes up a comic dialogue with an Italian Harlequin which has no bearing on the play's plot, but instead provides 'local' entertainment. The crux of the joke is that the Harlequin's wife is also an actor, and excels in 'a whore's part' (9.88), and from this detail develops an extended skit that plays on the gap between performance and reality in her erotic life – a gap that is closed when Kemp attempts to kiss her. When asked by the Harlequin what he means by this impropriety, Kemp replies: 'Why, to rehearse my part on your wife's lips' (9.114).

In this episode, which offers something like clowning 'squared' (or even 'cubed'), it is difficult to keep track of *locus* and *platea*. In a very basic sense a *locus* is still in place: Kemp and Anthony are 'in' Venice to the extent that they can discuss, with an Italian actor, culturally-specific conventions of acting (the fact that female roles in the *commedia dell'arte* were taken by women). In several other respects, though, the scene brings the *platea* into focus. The joke about *England's Joy* is not only 'topical' in the way that Piston's remarks on hackney carriages, or *Macbeth's* Porter's remarks on equivocation, are topical; it is also a joke about London's *theatrical* culture, and thus shifts attention not only towards London, but more precisely towards the London theatres. The back-and-forth dialogue between Kemp and the Harlequin, meanwhile, mimics the kind of *platea*-based clowning for which the real Kemp was famous, and thus gestures (as does the Porter's turn) towards a form of theatre that had been partially superseded since Kemp's departure from the theatre in 1598 and his death in 1603. In this respect the episode presents a moment that we might, borrowing Jonathan Gil

Harris's term, call 'untimely': one tradition of drama can be seen underneath another.<sup>18</sup> Or to look at it another way, the 'appearance' of Kemp in *Travels* reminds us that the spirit of the period's most famous clown did not leave the early modern playhouses with his body: even in the Jacobean period, drama refused to be entirely hedged in by the generic and spatial decorum advocated by Philip Sidney. The result, here, is a moment of extraordinary self-consciousness. In this meeting of Antony and Kemp there is an almost unsettling sense of the London theatre looking in on itself; though the playwrights continually remind their audience of the 'reality' of the geographically extravagant action they present (see esp. Prologue, 9-16), one of the 'locations' presented is the performance space itself.

It is not especially unusual to find the early modern theatre looking in on itself. But what I find striking about clowning within Mediterranean plays, and what I wish to focus on for the remainder of this essay, is how such clowning can draw attention to the *platea*-space at the very moments when plays seem most concerned with their *loci*, and how it therefore complicates the dramas' highly politicized dramatic geographies.

As Daniel Vitkus so powerfully demonstrated in his ground-breaking study *Turning Turk* (2003), what characterised the Mediterranean, for English playwrights and other commentators, was its instability. It was a geographical space in which cross-cultural commercial networks appeared mirrored by – and, perhaps, responsible for – the porous qualities of its inhabitants. The ubiquitous character-type in early modern Mediterranean drama is the 'liminal' figure who, in crossing borders, undergoes circumcision/castration, or a more broadly conceived 'conversion'. Recent scholarship has quite rightly seen this figure as emblematic of wider English anxieties relating to commercial and religious encounter. Less commented on, though, have been the curiously metatheatrical dimensions of conversion narratives. If the Mediterranean was deemed a 'between-space' by early modern playwrights

in that identities within it were especially fluid, then their conversion narratives created a ‘between-space’ in a different sense – by continually bring *locus* and *platea* into conversation.

Clowns are frequently involved in such moments – something that is perhaps unsurprising when we consider that the stock figure on which playwrights drew when staging apostates was the ‘ambidexter’. This is a comic figure who specialises in exchanging masters (the term comes from a medieval Latin word meaning ‘double-dealing’, or ‘practising on both sides’), and who, in a related sense, shows – like the Vice – little sense of loyalty towards his play’s governing ideology. One, from Thomas Preston’s *Cambyeses, King of Persia* (1569?), is actually called ‘Ambidexter’; he offers a comic counterpoint to the play’s militaristic focus, and also, like the clown-figures described above, establishes a close relationship with playgoers by speaking directly to them. A slightly later example of such a character is the aforementioned Subtle Shift, who draws attention to role he occupies when remarking: ‘Well, such shifting knaves as I am, the Ambodexter must play, / And for commoditie serve every man, whatsoever the world say’ (633-4). The first of these figures to appear in Mediterranean drama, and whose shiftiness has more culturally-specific permutations, is Basilisco, from Kyd’s *Soliman and Perseda*.<sup>19</sup> While the other knights of Kyd’s play attend a chivalric tournament as proud representatives of their respective nations, Basilisco, though a ‘Rutter’ by birth, is a man who will adopt the linguistic register of whichever environment he stumbles across: ‘I haue no word, because no countrey’, he remarks; ‘Each place is my habitation, / Therefore each countries word mine to pronounce’ (1.3.111-13). Like the ambidexter, and like the clown, Basilisco refuses to remain anchored to a single place: ‘My valour euery where shall purchase friends,’ he tells us; ‘And where a man liues well, there is his countrie’ (4.2.6-7). This flexibility extends to apostasy: in order to

save his life, Basilisco converts to Islam when Rhodes is conquered by the Turks, and then later reverts to Christianity.

Subsequent playwrights develop Basilisco's role: the 'liminal' figure of early modern Mediterranean drama becomes what Helen Cooper would call a 'meme', a repeated motif which appears in various forms across different texts.<sup>20</sup> In the two-part *Fair Maid of the West* (1601?, 1631), Heywood combines Kyd's Basilisco and Piston to create Clem, the upwardly-mobile clown-apprentice who is 'honoured' by being castrated for placement in the 'Alkedavy' of Mullisheg, King of Fez (I.5.2.99-106).<sup>21</sup> Having no idea what such a position entails until it is too late, Clem laments: 'No more of your honor, if you love me! Is this your Moorish preferment, to rob a man of his best jewels?' (I.5.2.126-7). There ensues, at the opening of the play's second part, a series of jokes about Clem's inability to perform sexually: 'I shall be sure never to be troubled with the stone' (II.1.1.51-2), he jests, before claiming that he can remain 'chaste' because he has 'ta'en a medicine for't (II.1.1.91). Later in the first decade of the seventeenth century, the 'liminal' figure takes on a more tragic colouring. The key text here is perhaps one that deals with a less religiously-specific sense of 'Eastern-ness': Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607). Though several of the play's characters – including Antony himself – allude either openly or cryptically to the Roman's having been emasculated by his Egyptian sojourn, jokes about castration are transformed into a more powerful narrative concerned with identity-construction and its reliance on cultural location. Shakespeare's play clearly influences Robert Daborne's presentation of his piratical anti-hero, Ward, in the play *A Christian Turned Turk* (1609-12);<sup>22</sup> Antony also stands behind Vitelli, the Italian hero of Philip Massinger's tragicomedy *The Renegado* (1623): both Ward and Vitelli are 'seduced' into what we might broadly call 'Eastern-ness' by a siren-like female character.<sup>23</sup> But alongside this more serious treatment of conversion, both Daborne and Massinger retain the comic motif: in Daborne's play, Benwash 'the Jew' (as he is known)

has converted to Islam in order to prevent Muslims from making advances on his wife, but is nevertheless cuckolded by a ‘Christian’ pirate; in *The Renegado*, the clown-servant Gazet proclaims his lack of a fixed religious identity in some of the play’s opening lines (1.1.32-7), and is later offered a position at court as a eunuch (like Clem misunderstanding what the role entails).<sup>24</sup>

Clowns are thus fundamentally involved in a plot-motif which demonstrates playwrights’ genuine interest in the realities of the politically and ethnically fluid early modern Mediterranean – a space Vitkus calls an ‘unstable meeting ground for divergent cultural and religious groups’.<sup>25</sup> But they also, through various metatheatrical strategies, create an unstable meeting ground between *locus* and *platea*. Sometimes this is managed through allusion. In *A Christian Turned Turk*, the clown-servant Ruben Rabshake suggests that the newly circumcised Ward has been the passive participant on his wedding night: that his wife Voada, to consummate the marriage, has sodomised him. In a frenzied blend of cultural stereotyping, the Jewish clown implies that the newly ‘Turked’ Englishman has been doing it ‘Italian style’ (that is, engaged in anal sex):

You, Turk, I have nothing to say to you. Ha, ha, ha! Poor fellow, how he looks since Mahomet had the handling of him! He hath had a sore night at ‘Who’s that knocks at the backdoor?’ Cry you mercy, I thought you were an Italian captain.

(13.52-5)

The episode obliquely echoes Cleopatra’s description of the night she wore Antony’s ‘sword Philippan’ (2.5.23),<sup>26</sup> but it more directly recalls a scene in which, as here, a clown teases an apostate: in *Soliman and Perseda*, pitying the recently converted Basilisco for having been

‘hurt before’ (circumcised/castrated), Piston suggests that he keep ‘an eye to the back dore’ (4.2.51-3).<sup>27</sup> One dramatic conversion narrative is, it seems, being structured through another.

Harry Berger, Jr. has observed that ‘Theater stages theatricality ... by inscribing the structure of theatrical relations within the dramatic fictions it stages’. In this way, he suggests, ‘a kind of map of its structure, its history, and its internal and external relations is inscribed in theater’s metadiscourse, or in a discourse of metatheater that quickly becomes part of its repertoire of conventions’.<sup>28</sup> Very few aspects of early modern drama would be better illuminated by Berger’s observations than the clown-inflected conversion motif of Mediterranean plays. This motif became part of Mediterranean drama’s ‘repertoire of conventions’, with playwrights continually re-working and re-framing one another’s plots, scenes, and even lines. Given the prominence of these dramatic echoes, or what Jonathan Gil Harris and William N. West have recently called ‘intertheatricality’, playgoers watching the dramas unfold would have sensed that they were looking at more than one ‘place’.<sup>29</sup> Rather as the presence of Zariph, in *Travels*, situates the play within the world of *The Merchant of Venice*, so in *A Christian Turned Turk* dramatic location is constructed in something like a process of sedimentation – the play is set not only in Tunis, but also in the world of *Soliman and Perseda*, and is in this sense ghosted both by the *loci* of that play (Rhodes, Constantinople) and by the theatre within which those *loci* were presented. Rich and fluid dramatic geographies of this kind could only have been created, of course, within theatres lacking the detailed scenery that would ‘lock down’ location.

The conversion scenes of Mediterranean drama also seem, on occasion, to glance at their own commercial viability, thus again pulling the theatre into focus. Playing companies and playwrights, sensitive to the popularity of, in particular, Marlowe’s two-part *Tamburlaine* (1587-8), were keen to cash in on playgoers’ desires for dramas set in exotic locations and featuring fancily-clad characters – the kinds of dramas in which we find conversion

narratives;<sup>30</sup> and *Soliman and Perseda*, a play that is very much in the shadow of *Tamburlaine*, indirectly comments on its costumes' commercial appeal.<sup>31</sup> Again, comic characters figure prominently in such moments. Converting to Islam in order to avoid execution, Basilisco alters his costume accordingly; when, towards the end of the play, he elects to return to the Christian fold, another character expresses disappointment that he is no longer dressed so colourfully: 'how chance, / Your turkish bonet [i.e. turban] is not on your head?' (5.3.13-14), she asks.<sup>32</sup> It is not only Basilisco who is given this treatment in Kyd's drama. On travelling to Constantinople, the hero Erastus refuses to wear the fancy clothes given him by Soliman. His clown-servant Piston picks him up on this point:

*Pist.*       Faith, maister, me thinkes you are vnwise,  
                   That you weare not the high Sugerloafe hat,  
                   And the gilded gowne the Emperour gaue you.  
*Erast.*       Peace, foole, a sable weed fits discontent[.]

(4.1.1-4)

This exchange reveals the high value – later registered, while simultaneously debunked, by Hamlet (1.2.77-86) – that the early modern stage puts on employing trappings and suits to express character and mood: we know Erastus is mourning his loss of Perseda because he is wearing black. But Piston's remark also reminds us that playgoers expected to be impressed by the dazzling dress of players. Kyd's characters seem to be speaking for the audience when they express regret that their companions are not more extravagantly attired.

At other times the costumes do appear, but in such a way that attention is drawn to their theatricality. In *The Renegado*, the Italian hero Vitelli has a liaison with the Ottoman princess



Donusa deep within the profoundly orientalist space of the Tunisian Islamic palace. When he emerges, richly attired and attended by a eunuch, the Friar Francisco draws attention to his alteration: 'I am troubled,' he says, after seeing and speaking to Vitelli; "'Tis he, / But strangely metamorphosed' (2.6.7, 19-20).<sup>33</sup> In some respects this episode would seem to offer the perfect exemplar of the liminal 'Mediterranean' character: Vitelli has been altered through contact with the 'luxurious' East. But this locational reading is problematised by the play's clown: 'by his rich suit', remarks Gazet, Vitelli 'should be some French ambassador' (2.6.9). So far as Gazet is concerned, Vitelli has become not more 'Turkish', but more theatrical: he likens his master to a figure known for dressing up. Similar moments point more directly towards the theatre itself. As I have related, in the first part of Heywood's *The Fair Maid*, the clown-apprentice Clem is tempted to convert to Islam because of the financial advancement such a move would promise. Before doing so he enters the stage in Moorish attire, and suddenly develops a thespian itch. 'Now may I speak with the old ghost in *Jeronimo*' (I.5.1.112), Clem says, alluding to Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* – a mainstay of the early modern theatres that would, by the time *The Fair Maid* was staged, have been associated with theatrical bombast.<sup>34</sup> He then reels off comically misremembered chunks of *The Spanish Tragedy*'s opening. While dressed exotically, it seems, the clown feels himself to be *on stage*, and 'in' a play known for its staginess. Clem's co-character Goodlack even congratulates the clown-apprentice on his theatrical performance: 'Oh, well done, Clem!' (I.5.1.116). I have suggested that clown-figures often remain decidedly 'in the theatre' while also participating in their plays' fictional worlds. Clem offers a slight variation on this phenomenon: he slides, at least partially and temporarily, into a different early modern play.<sup>35</sup>

The exotic costumes of these dramas point, then, in two directions: towards the *loci* those costumes help evoke, and towards the *platea* on which the *loci* are staged. Daniel Vitkus calls Clem's castration 'a comic moment that literalizes English anxieties about the

effemination that would allegedly result from contact with Islamic culture', thus stressing its connection to the realities of the Mediterranean world.<sup>36</sup> But episodes like this also look inward, escaping the cultural moorings of their notional settings in order to reflect on the practice of the playhouse itself. The clowning of these plays offers one indication, I would suggest, of the early modern stage's highly fluid spatial grammar. Flexible in its performance styles, drawing upon and negotiating different theatrical traditions, and consistently interested in its own presentational strategies as well as in the geographical spaces it presents, early modern drama creates a sense of location which is malleable, porous and capacious.

How does this spatial grammar inform the plays' wider meanings? I would like to close by making one suggestion in this area. John Gillies has written influentially about how Shakespearean drama, in common with the drama of his contemporaries, establishes a 'geography of difference'.<sup>37</sup> There is a great deal of truth in this argument: cultural geographers and anthropologists have long been alert to what Denis Cosgrove dubbed the 'distance decay function', a process through which a culture, assuming itself to be at the centre of the world and thus the site of 'correct' behaviour, fashions the rest of the world in a series of concentric circles that become more 'barbaric' as they radiate out.<sup>38</sup> But the kinds of dramaturgical operations I have been describing surely complicate this dynamic: a 'geography of difference' may be inscribed in poetry or prose; it may also operate in certain kinds of theatre. But can it really be established through a mode of performance which continually brings 'there' into conjunction with 'here'? It seems to me that clowning – which effects interwoven locational and generic complications that undermine, or at least offer an alternative to, a play's dominant perspective – prevents the dramas in which it occurs from fashioning geographies whose meanings depend on strict boundaries. Clowns simply refuse to take the required differentiations seriously; their movement across different kinds of spaces can be read as a political act that undermines ideologies based on clear differentiations. There

is, perhaps, a reason why *Othello*'s clown is – even as clowns go – so peripheral to the play's action, and why he never gets to meet its hero: Shakespeare's tragedy depends, for its dramatic impact, on the maintenance of a 'boundary discourse' which more prominent and sustained clowning might dissolve.

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### *Biography*

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, or The Defence of Poesy*, ed. by Geoffrey Shepherd, revised and expanded for 3<sup>rd</sup> edn by R. W. Maslen (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002), 110-11, 112.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bridget Escolme, who has suggested that early modern dramatic characters' constructions of subjectivity are informed by their awareness of an audience before which they perform (*Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, performance, self* (Oxford, Routledge, 2005)); Evelyn B. Tribble, meanwhile, has considered how rehearsal and performance conditions shape and determine interactions between actors – and, thus, characters (*Cognition in the Globe: Attention and Memory in Shakespeare's Theatre* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011)). See also Sarah Dustagheer's discussion of the ways in which scholars have reacted to opening of Shakespeare's Globe in [this volume, XX-XX](#); for a discussion of how much reconstructed theatres can tell us about the spatial configurations of early modern performances, see Tim Fitzpatrick, [this volume, XX-XX](#).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Janette Dillon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> For thoughts on how theatrical space can impact on performance style, see Frank Whately, 'Actors' Conversations at the Rose Theatres', [this volume, XX](#).

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Anne Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, Methuen, 2006). See Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Smith, 'E/loco/com/motion', in Peter Holland and Stephen Orgel (eds), *From Script to Stage in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 131-50: 141.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, 'E/loco/com/motion', 142.

<sup>8</sup> Weimann, *Author's Pen*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Clyomon and Clamydes*, ed. by Betty J. Littleton (Paris, Mouton, 1968). For Shift's address to the audience, see, for example, 629, 854, 934, 1478.

<sup>10</sup> As Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean note, this tactic of parodying the main plot through clowning was typical of Queen's Men fare, and is also encountered in the company's history plays (*The Queen's Men and their Plays* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 135).

<sup>11</sup> Escolme, *Talking to the Audience*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> For further thoughts on the political dimensions of early modern clowning, see Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York and London, Routledge, 1985).

- <sup>13</sup> Thomas Kyd, *Soliman and Perseda*, in F. S. Boas (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Kyd* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1901), 161-230.
- <sup>14</sup> Weimann, *Author's Pen*, 207.
- <sup>15</sup> John Day, George Wilkins and William Rowley, *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*, in Anthony Parr (ed.), *Three Renaissance Travel Plays* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995), 55-134.
- <sup>16</sup> Jack D'Amico, *Shakespeare and Italy: The City and the Stage* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2001), 131.
- <sup>17</sup> See Parr's note in *Travel Plays*, 104.
- <sup>18</sup> See Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 33-87.
- <sup>19</sup> A braggart knight, Basilisco has a mixed theatrical heritage: there is also something of the Roman *miles gloriosus* in him.
- <sup>20</sup> Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. 3-7.
- <sup>21</sup> Thomas Heywood, *The Fair Maid of the West*, ed. by Robert K Turner, Jr (London, Edward Arnold, 1968).
- <sup>22</sup> Robert Daborne, *A Christian Turned Turk*, in Daniel Vitkus (ed.), *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000), 148-239.
- <sup>23</sup> Daborne and Massinger were drawing on Shakespeare, but also on wider cultural discourses that linked conversion to Islam with sexual seduction.
- <sup>24</sup> Philip Massinger, *The Renegado*, ed. by Michael Neill (London, Methuen, 2010).
- <sup>25</sup> Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (New York, Palgrave, 2003), 8.
- <sup>26</sup> William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. by John Wilders (London, Arden, 1995).
- <sup>27</sup> For a discussion of 'turning Turk' and its relationship to 'preposterous amour' (that is, sodomy), see Patricia Parker, 'Preposterous Conversions: Turning Turk, and its "Pauline" Rerighting', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 2:1 (2002), 1-34.
- <sup>28</sup> Harry Berger, Jr., *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997), 297.
- <sup>29</sup> Harris, *Untimely Matter*, esp. 67-8; William N. West, 'Intertheatricality', in Henry S. Turner (ed.), *Early Modern Theatricality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), 151-72. *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*, a play which (despite being based on historical events) offers something like a mix-tape of Mediterranean plays, includes an episode (12.108-18) in which the Sultan himself tempts Thomas Sherley to convert to Islam. For a fuller discussion of the play's allusive strategies, see my article 'Strangers at Home: The Sherley Brothers and Dramatic Romance', *Renaissance Studies* 24:5 (2010), 694-709.
- <sup>30</sup> For the appeal of Turk-material to playing companies, see Mark Hutchings, 'The "Turk Phenomenon" and the Repertory of the late Elizabethan Playhouse', *Early Modern Literary Studies* Special Issue 16 (October, 2007).
- <sup>31</sup> Lukas Erne notes that 'Marlowe and Kyd appear to have been influenced by the same page of the same work [Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographie Universelle*] in *2 Tamburlaine* and *Soliman and Perseda*' (*Beyond 'The Spanish Tragedy': A Study of the Works of Thomas Kyd* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001), 165-6). He goes on to suggest that the death of Kyd's heroine is modelled on that of Olympia in *2 Tamburlaine*.
- <sup>32</sup> Given the context, there may also be a bawdy joke here relating to Basilisco's circumcision.
- <sup>33</sup> The word 'metamorphosed' may also register, once again, the threat of castration, gesturing towards the Hermaphroditus story within Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book IV).
- <sup>34</sup> See, for example, Tribble, *Cognition*, 109-10.
- <sup>35</sup> In a similar moment in *A Christian Turned Turk*, the clown-servant Ruben Rabshake, having been (despite living in Tunis) educated by the plot of *The Spanish Tragedy*, guesses (correctly) that his master Benwash, who is trying to convince him to commit a murder, will most likely reward the deed by subsequently murdering him – just as Lorenzo murders the servant Pedringano in Kyd's play. 'I conceive you, sir', Rabshake tells Benwash, 'I have seen the play of Pedringano, sir – of Pedringano, sir' (16.127-9).
- <sup>36</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 135.
- <sup>37</sup> John Gillies, *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- <sup>38</sup> See Richard J. A. Talbert, Introduction to Kurt A. Raaflaub and Talbert (eds), *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Pre-Modern Societies* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2012), 1-7 (4).